

Parasū-Rāma

The main outlines of his legend.

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AMONGST all the obscure and puzzling figures of Hindu Mythology Parasū-Rāma occupies one of the foremost places. And while heroes like Rāma Dāśarathi or Arjuna can only evoke our sympathy and admiration he also appears to us singularly unsympathetic. He is vainglorious, self-seeking, and cruel ; and the tradition scarcely reveals one single trait in this curious character that might evoke our deeper feelings. Thus he remains a puzzle and, besides, a dark and ominous one.

The following short remarks can in no way pretend to solve the riddles connected with Parasū-Rāma. They are only meant to put together the main outlines of his legend and to try to draw some conclusions from them.

Rāma Bhārgava or *Jāmadagnya* does not seem to be known to Vedic lore.¹ On the other hand he is a well-known figure in the Great Epic ; as, however, he cannot well ever have had any direct dealings with the heroes of the Mahābhārata and, consequently, does not enter into the main epic action we cannot decide whether he was known to the oldest Bhārata-poem² or not. And the additional parts of the Great Epic are unfortunately so far quite undateable—except that a collection of some 100,000 *śloka*s must have been in existence by the latest about 500 A.D., which really means during the reign of the last of the Great Guptas. Thus the oldest passage, which can be dated with any degree of certainty, where we meet with Rāma, seems to be Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* IX, 25.

1. The *Ait. Br.* VII, 27-3, presents the well-known episode of *Rāma Mārgaveya*, a priest of the Śyāparṇas and a contemporary of the great Janamejaya. An interchange between *m* and *bh* is well attested to (cf. especially Mr. Przyłuski *JA*, 1926 : I, 3 sqq. ; 1929 : I, 313 sqq. and *BSL.* XXX (1930), 196 sqq.), and it would be well possible that *Mārgaveya* and *Bhārgava* might be connected in this way. If such were the case the form with *m* would probably be the original one, and then *Bhṛgu* would really be a later development of *Mṛgu*. However, I fail to discover any possible connection on historical or legendary reasons, between Parasū-Rāma and this otherwise unknown *Rāma Mārgaveya*.

2. This was probably the *Mahābhārata* mentioned by Pāṇini VI, 2, 38, which would at any rate bring us as far back as about 500 B.C.

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Bhīṣmeṇa Gaṇḍodarasambhavena Rāmeṇa Rāmeṇa ca Bhārgaveṇa |
Śrutvā kṛtaṃ karma pituḥ priyārtham pituḥ tvam apy arhasi kartum
iṣṭam ||

For there can be little doubt, in face of a wholly unanimous tradition, that Aśvaghōṣa was a contemporary of Kaniṣka; and to the present writer there can also be little doubt that Kaniṣka was really the founder of the Śaka era (78 A.D.).³ Aśvaghōṣa apparently was conversant with the story of Jamadagni, Reṇukā and Rāma Jāmadagnya; for his words can allude to nothing else.

If then we turn to the Mahābhārata we shall find the story of Rāma Jāmadagnya more or less completely told in several passages. The most extensive one seems to be III, 114-117. The introductory paragraph (114) tells us how the Pāṇḍavas on their pilgrimage reached the Vaitaraṇī in Kaliṅga, where was the altar of Kaśyapa, and how they rested at Mt. Mahendra.⁴ There they meet with Akṛtavraṇa, a votary of Jāmadagnya, who tells them the main outlines of his story. In 115 we hear about Arjuna Kārttavīrya, his thousand arms, his favour with Dattātreya and his oppression of the gods.⁵ We further hear about the wooing of Satyavatī, daughter of Gādhi, by Ṛcika, son of Bhṛgu, and of their wedding. A very primitive-looking story is told concerning the conception of a son by Satyavatī; and after various events, which can well be left aside as being rather unimportant, she bears the great sage Jamadagni.

Jamadagni in due time married Reṇukā, the daughter of a certain king Prasenajit; she bore him five sons, the youngest of whom was Rāma. When Reṇukā became enamoured of King Citraratha of Mārttikāvata, Jamadagni ordered his sons to kill her. The four elder ones

3. Professor Konow's fancies concerning the Śaka era (*Corpus Inscr. Ind.* II: 1, p. lxxxvii sqq.), which he wants wholly to disconnect from Kaniṣka, have been ably refuted by Professor Rapson *J.R.A.S.*, 1930 p. 191, sqq. To this criticism no adequate answer has been forthcoming.

4. Such a passage, according to my humble opinion, cannot belong to any especially ancient part of the Epic. The Pāṇḍavas were rulers of the Ganges-Jumna Districts and had their main connections with the North-West; it seems utterly incredible that at the period, when they may have flourished, pilgrimages were undertaken towards the holy places of Bengal and Orissa.

5. That Rāma Jāmadagnya killed an oppressor of the Gods (Arjuna), just as the man-lion killed Hiraṇyakaśipu and Rāma Dāśarathi annihilated Rāvaṇa, may have given the start to his being looked upon as an *avatāra*. Dattātreya also is an *avatāra*, though apparently a rather late one (cp. Hopkins *Epic Mythology*, pp. 184, 218).

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refused to perform such a heinous crime and, in consequence of their disobedience, became deranged in their minds. Rāma, however, decapitated Reṇukā with his axe. Jamadagni then granted him all his wishes, and thus the mother was revived,⁶ the brothers became of sound mind again, and Rāma himself from hence became invincible in battle.

Arjuna Kārttavīrya, displeased with his reception in the hermitage of Jamadagni, carried off the calf of the *homa*-cow, whereupon Rāma with his arrows cut off his arms and killed him. Afterwards, Rāma having gone to the forest to fetch fuel, the sons of Arjuna killed Jamadagni (116). Upon this Rāma not only slew the real culprits but also twenty-one times annihilated the Kṣattriyas. With their blood he filled the five tanks at Samantapañcaka; finally, however, R̥cika stopped his revolting bloodshed. Rāma now performed a great sacrifice⁷ and gave the earth as *dakṣiṇā* to the officiating priest. He himself retired to Mt. Mahendra where he was still seen by the Pāṇḍavas (117).⁸

The same story is told, although only in parts and in a more compendious form, in XII, 49, sqq. The end of that episode is the following: when at the end of the *āśvamedha* Rāma had bequeathed the earth to Kaśyapa, this one exiled him to the border of the Southern Ocean. There the sea prepared for him a residence at *Śūrpāraka* (Sopārā) in Konkan (*Aparāntamahītale*). We shall have something to say presently on the connection between Paraśu-Rāma and *Śūrpāraka*.

In VII, Fo, 1 sqq. Rāma Jāmadagnya is said to have annihilated Arjuna and the Warrior Caste with his arrow (*dhanus*), his sword (*asi*), his club (*musala*), and his axe (*paraśu*).⁹ After his victories he built the golden *vedi* on the Vaitaraṇī and gave the earth to Kaśyapa, *haya-medhe mahāmakhe*.¹⁰ Kaśyapa, however, at once drove him away from the inhabited earth—probably because of the sin he had incurred by

6. With the resurrection of Reṇukā is connected the curious legend of the pariah woman, which became known to Goethe through the works of Dapper and Sonnerat. Literature on this subject is found in my edition of the *Livro da Seita dos indios Orientais* (Brit. Mus. Ms. Sloane 1820) of Father Jacobo Fenicio, S.J. (Upsala 1933) p. 207.

7. Apparently as *āśvamedha*.

8. Paraśu-Rāma, of course, is a *cirajivin* of whom there seem generally to be seven, the other ones being *Āsvatthāman*, *Kṛpa*, *Vyāsa*, *Hanuman*, *Vibhīṣaṇa* and *Bali*. To these is sometimes added *Mārkaṇḍeya*. According to certain traditions *Agastya* is also a *cirajivin* and living at Rāmeśvaram.

9. This weapon he had obtained from Śiva after worshipping him on the Gandhamādana.

10. According to VII, 2444: *Iṣṭvā kratuśataiḥ*. Paraśu-Rāma even appears as a *Satakratu*.

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shedding streams of human blood—and he then conquered some land from the ocean by means of his arrows and sat down on Mahendra.

Finally in III, 99, 34 sqq. We find the story of his meeting with Rāma Dāśarathi¹¹ who spans his bow and then appears to him in his true shape as Viṣṇu. Jāmadagnya, having thus lost his *tejas*, retired to Mahendra; after a year he, however, recovered his lost glory at the *tīrtha* of Bhṛgutuṅga.

These are the main features of the story of Paraśu-Rāma as contained in the Great Epic.¹² There are, however, outside the Mahābhārata tradition, certain legends of him to which we shall now turn.¹³

The chief interest centres in the stories told of how Paraśu-Rāma recovered land from the ocean. In the Mahābhārata he generally resides on Mt. Mahendra, which is undoubtedly connected with the tradition that his golden altar was on the Vaitaraṇī, and that there he celebrated his *asvamedha*. This may be a fairly old Orissan tradition; but though it has gained entrance into the Great Epic it seems to one decidedly to be of secondary origin. For there is little doubt that, according to traditions which are still flourishing, the land which Paraśu-Rāma recovered from the sea was Konkan (*Aparānta*); and his chief residences were Śūrpāraka (Sopārā) and Mt. Sahyādri. South Indian traditions also have it that the land recovered was in reality Malabar or even the whole stretch of land below the Ghats from Gokarṇa to Cape Comorin; but these stories are apparently of later origin.

Already the Mahābhārata tells us that Rāma Jāmadagnya intimidated the ocean by shooting an arrow across it, and this is repeated in later sources. According to another tradition he performed the same feat by hurling his axe from Gokarṇa to Comorin.¹⁴ Finally a third version tells us that Paraśu-Rāmā in a magical way produced a corn-swing (*Śūrpa*), which he threw across the waves or simply shook and thus made the sea

11. Cp. *Rāmāyaṇa* I, 74-76, gloriously paraphrased by Kālidāsa Raghuvamśa XI, 59 sqq.

12. The story of Rāma Jāmadagnya and Karṇa (VIII, 42; cp. the introductory dialogue of the Trivandrum play *Karṇabhāra*) as far as I know is mentioned nowhere else and does not belong to the original legend of Paraśu-Rāma.

13. Most of the available literature on this extra-epic tradition has been quoted in my edition of Fenicio mentioned above pp. 205-208.

14. To this tradition there exists a curious Irish parallel. Tuirbe Trágmair, father of Gobañ Saer, used to hurl his axe from a hill in the full of the flood-tide, forbidding the sea to proceed beyond the axe. cp. Stokes *Revue Celtique* XVI (1895) 77; *Folk-lore* IV, 488 sq.

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recede from the foot of the Ghats. The *Śūrpa* no doubt is a magical instrument,¹⁵ and is used for various arts of sorcilege and divination. What does, however, interest us most in this connection is that the name *Śūrpāraka* (Sopārā) must undoubtedly be derived from *Śūrpa*, and that consequently the foundation of that port was connected by tradition with the recovery of the Konkan by Paraśu-Rāma.¹⁶ As *Śūrpāraka* must have existed as a place of some importance already at the time of Aśoka (c. 250 B.C.) we might thus be able to carry the story of Rāma's recovery of land from the ocean by means of his *Śūrpa* at least into the third or fourth century B.C.

Into the land thus recovered by the sea, Paraśu-Rāma according to one tradition led Brahmins from the North. However, other traditions, for which documentary evidence is found in my edition of Fenicio l.c., tell us that he turned fishermen into Brahmins, making sacrificial cords from their nets; that he raised ship-wrecked corpses to life and turned them into Konkanasth Brahmins; or even that he created the Karhād Brahmins from camel bones. The relative age and value of these various traditions is, unfortunately, not known.

The name of Paraśu-Rāma is also connected with the origin of several castes especially in the South, many of whom are of rather low standing.

There is also a tradition that Paraśu-Rāma with his axe cleft a passage through the Himālaya. This story is perhaps most expressively referred to in the well-known verse, *Meghadūta*, 57 :

*prāleyādrer upataṭam atikramya tāṃs taṃ viśeṣān
haṃsadvāram Bhṛgupatyaśovartma yat Krauñcarandhram |
tenodīciṃ dīśam anusares tiryagāyāmaśobhī
śyāmaḥ pādo Baliniyamanābhryudyatasyeva Viṣṇoḥ ||*

and is shortly alluded to in the *Raghuvamśa* XI, 4: *bibhrato 'stram acale' py akunṣhitam*, etc. Later traditions have it that Paraśu-Rāma with his axe opened a way for the Brahmaputra.

There are also numerous other stories told of our hero—especially in Southern India—but they generally seem to be of late origin and are of no importance for our present purpose.

15. To the references collected in my edition of Fenicio p. 206 may be added Fehrle *Archivf. Rel. Wiss.* XIX, 547 sqq.; Marmorstein *ibid.* XXI, 235 sqq.; J.J. Meyer *WZKM.* XLII, 112 sqq.

16. This I have proved to some extent in *JRAS.* 1927, p. 111 sqq.

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If after this we throw a glance at the figure of Paraśu-Rāma, it at once strikes us that only in texts of fairly late origin is he considered to be an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. The passages from the Great Epic quoted above contain nothing about his being an *avatāra*; nor does the first book of the Rāmāyaṇa or even the Raghuvamśa know anything of his connection with the Supreme God. It is only in the very latest parts of the Mahābhārata, in the Harivaṃśa, and in certain Purāṇas that he figures in the various lists of *avatāras*.¹⁷ And the conclusion seems inevitable that at least in their present shape such passages must be younger than Kālidāsa who flourished during the fifth century A.D. Consequently Paraśu-Rāma did not become generally recognised as an *avatāra* until after that date.

It has been pointed out above that Paraśu-Rāma was probably originally connected with the Konkan and Mt. Sahyādri, and that his connections with Malabar and Orissa are most probably secondary ones. Śūr-pāraka (Sopārā), the capital of Aparānta (Konkan), was in some way connected with the story of how Paraśu-Rāma recovered the coast-land below the Ghats from the ocean; and as Sopārā must have existed some time before the period of Aśoka the legend and perhaps even the cult of Paraśu-Rāma may have existed in Aparānta¹⁸ already in the third or fourth century B.C. May be he was already at an early date looked upon locally as an *avatāra*, and perhaps this idea spread from the Konkan towards the South and the East—for although not unknown in the North his fame seems to be less great in that direction. His original connection with the Konkan is underlined by the fact that his chief opponent, Arjuna Kārttavīrya, was king of the Haihayas, who lived between the Chambal and the Narmadā,¹⁹ and had for his capital Māhiṣmatī on the last-mentioned river.²⁰

Paraśu-Rāma was son of the great ṛṣi Jamadagni but his mother was the daughter of a king; and the mother of Jamadagni again was daughter of king Gādhi of Kānyakubja. Although in the later tradition, looked upon as a paragon of Brahmin pride and the protagonist of Brahmin rights and prerogatives, Paraśu-Rāma filled no priestly functions. He led the life of a warrior and handled the arms instead of the sacrificial utensils. He even celebrated at least one *āśvamedha*, which was always

17. cp. Hopkins *Epic Mythology* pp. 211, 217 sq.

18. *Aparānta (ka)*, as is well known, is mentioned in the Rock-Edicts, cp. JRAS. 1927, p. 111, No. 2.

19. cp. CHI. I, 316.

20. cp. CHI. I, 603.

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looked upon as the sacrifice especially belonging to the royal caste. Like the kings of yore he bestowed the whole earth as a *dakṣiṇā* upon the officiating priests. Into his new dominion he either introduced Brahmins from the North²¹ or created new ones in one way or other. It cannot be denied that tradition scarcely supports the suggestion that Paraśu-Rāma was originally living according to strict Brahmin rules. He rather appears to have belonged to a period and to surroundings where the difference between the royal and the priestly class was less strong than it became later on. If the strict caste system originated in Madhyadeśa and thence spread in various directions, Paraśu-Rāma may well have belonged to a period when it had not fully penetrated Konkan, which was perhaps rather lately colonised from the North. We have also every reason to remember that according to the generally accepted genealogy, Viśvāmītra, who from having been a prince finally turned Brahmin, was the paternal grand-uncle of Paraśu-Rāma.

It does not seem impossible to me that some sort of historical happenings lie at the bottom of the story of Paraśu-Rāma and the Kṣattriyas. He cannot well have annihilated the whole warrior caste—and that even at twenty-one repeated occasions; for Kṣattriyas continued to exist in plenty even after his time; and the story of the pregnant Kṣattriya-wives is only a sort of poor make-up which may well be left aside. What Paraśu-Rāma did was probably that he rooted out clans of warriors of foreign descent, who were at that time in possession of the Konkan and the regions bordering upon it. And it seems fairly safe to suggest that after this he led into those parts an invasion of Northern Brahmins and of people who lived according to the rules of a Brahminized Society.

Unfortunately, Paraśu-Rāma's war against some foreign Kṣattriyas cannot be identified with any invasion of the Konkan known to exact historical research. It must belong to a more remote time which is known to us only through the rather contorted traditions surviving within the Great Epic. However, I feel fairly convinced that the story of Paraśu-Rāma, Arjuna Kārtavīrya, and the Kṣattriyas was originally an episode in the long story of the spread of North Indian civilization and institutions towards the South. Undoubtedly the way of the Northern invaders at first lay along the Western coast through Konkan, Kanara, and Malabar. To the Brahminized invaders of the Konkan, Paraśu-Rāma became the great hero, who was thought to have won land from the sea, and who

21. Tradition does not tell us from where in the North. If, however, Paraśu-Rāma had really any relationship with the dynasty of Kānyakubja one might guess that the Brahmins issued from there. However, I am aware of no traditional connection between the Kanaujia and the Konkanasth Brahmins.

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continued to live in recess on Mt. Sahyādri in order to protect his native land. There he probably came to be looked upon as an *avatāra* of the Supreme God, and from there the belief in his godhead spread—chiefly towards the South but apparently also to Orissa—at a fairly late date.

These short remarks seem to me to contain about what, at the present state of our knowledge, we may feel entitled to enucleate from the traditions concerning Paraśu-Rāma.